

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
May 29, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
The Centurion

I had only visited Edina Morningside Church one time in my life before your Interim Ministry Search Committee invited me to an in-person interview in March 2015. The one-time visit was when I attended the ordination service of Rev. Mike MacMillan. Mike served in ministry with me at Mayflower Church during 2010 and I consider him, today, to be one of my most beloved UCC clergy friends. On that visit I did feel almost totally like an “outsider”. All of you were strangers to me. I knew only Mike and his family, the members of the Conference’s Committee on Ministry from other UCC churches that presided over Mike’s ordination, and Rev. Eleazar Fernandez, who preached Mike’s ordination sermon.

As to geography, I had no awareness of the Morningside community even though I worked just a little more than three miles from the church for 20 years when I was the Executive Director for Pathways in the Uptown neighborhood of South Minneapolis. I remember having a difficult time finding the church on the day of Mike’s ordination and even to this day have not been able to find the church parking lot!

How quickly my feeling of being an outsider ended once I began in ministry with you. From the day of the interview and on into today, I have felt welcomed and included by all of you. My being openly gay and in a same-gender marriage never seemed to me to be cause for feeling like an outsider. When one of you mentioned that having called an openly gay minister was a significant marker for EMC, I actually found myself asking whom this person was referencing. Then I realized it was I! You have entered into my heart and soul as we have worshipped together, fellowshiped together, met in meeting after meeting together, and shared ministry together. Thank you for accepting my leadership, for challenging me, and – together – for envisioning a vital faith community for many years to come.

Soon, another outsider will be arriving in your midst. I am confident that you will extend the same welcome and spirit of inclusion for him or her, as you begin what is hoped will be a long-term ministry together. I am confident that it will be so, given what we have accomplished together in Interim Ministry, and given your faithfulness to God’s mission for this church and all the strengths of this beloved community that I have been privileged to observe.

However, both of our texts today, challenge us to go deeper in considering how inclusive we are in our individual lives and in our life together as a faith community. Biblical Commentator Debra J. Mumford, lays out an understanding of how radical Solomon’s prayer was for Solomon’s community. *“Solomon asked God to bless the prayers of foreigners. What a surprise! It is very rare in the Hebrew Bible to find an Israelite asking YHWH to hear and grant the petitions of non-Israelites.”* Mumford continues: *“(Solomon) had two reasons for making this request. He wanted people all over the world to know and fear God’s name. He also wanted people all over the world to know that God’s name had been invoked over the*

*temple that he built. Solomon's prayer was at once inclusive and self-interested. He built the temple. Even non-Israelites needed to know YHWH dwelled in the temple that he (Solomon) built...*¹ The Israelites of that time would have been considered more exclusive of other faiths, beliefs and practices rather than inclusive. Solomon at least encouraged them to consider that their God was a God for all people – even those who might not believe as they believed. How open are we to people of other faiths? Do we see strengths in their beliefs that might even benefit and enrich us in our faiths.

At Pathways, I treasured the opportunities I had to learn about and to engage in practices with the Jewish community, the Buddhist community, and followers of what some refer to as “new age” spirituality – or those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. I personally found great meaning in the healing understandings found in Eastern religions such as those based on the energy centers known as chakras and meridians that form the principles underlying both acupuncture and acupressure. Unfortunately, it was difficult to teach or fully embrace Christianity at Pathways since Christianity is viewed in our culture as being primarily exclusive of any other of these significant faiths and understandings. I told many fundamentalist Christians who came to check out our resources, that their faith and view of understanding the world in fundamentalist Christian ways would not prevent them from participating at Pathways, but that their religious leaders more likely would not accept the alternative spiritual practices offered at Pathways. I truly felt that my Christian faith was enriched by learning the teachings and understandings of beliefs outside of my religion. I loved and felt enriched by seeing God as greater than my own understanding of God.

For our world today, Commentator Mumford suggests the following: “...*We as Christians can build upon Solomon's prayers in a world sorely in need of inclusivity. The world in which we live needs people who are firmly rooted in their faith traditions but willing to talk with and to learn from people of other faiths. Being people of God is not about owning God. Rather it is about glorifying God in all that we do—including the ways we relate to people who are different from us and believe differently than we do.*”² Are we at Edina Morningside Church firmly rooted in our faith traditions and willing to talk with and to learn from people of other faiths? I was pleased that we ventured tenderly into this area during this year’s Lenten Series. My prayer for the future is that EMC will continue both to learn from the foreigner – or those we might consider outsiders – among us and to engage in meaningful dialogue and exchange over ways to understand God and ways to care for God’s people throughout the world.

Our New Testament text for today also is a story that introduces us to a foreigner in the city of Capernaum. Rev. Susan A. Blain, Minister for Faith Formation, United Church of Christ wrote the following to help us understand the meaning of this text. She says: “*Conventional wisdom is astonished by the encounter of the centurion and Jesus. The centurion is a gentile, yet loves Jewish tradition; the centurion represents an occupying power, yet wins the trust of*

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

the people's leaders; the centurion exercises power over those in his command, yet cares for the life of a slave, the centurion embodies all military and political power in the area, yet turns to a poor, itinerant preacher for healing. Even Jesus is astonished at the faith of the centurion."³

The Centurion is in need of healing – not for himself but “...for a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.” (Luke 7: 2) Hear these words from the text spoken to Jesus by the Centurion’s Jewish friends: “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” (Luke 7: 4b- 5). We are then told that Jesus was convinced by the words of the Centurion’s friends that he should go to a Gentile’s home. Yet, the Centurion sent another group of friends to stop Jesus from having to come to his home. These friends convey the following words as spoken by the Centurion: “But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” (Luke 7: 7) Jesus was so astounded by the Centurion’s faith that he responded: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” (Luke 7: 9b) Different than other healing stories from the gospels, Jesus neither confirms nor denies what the Centurion says. He does not say that the Centurion’s faith has made his slave well. He does even commit to healing the slave from a distance. We are simply told: “When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (Luke 7:10)

Commentator Charles Bugg says, *This is a text about faith. It is not about the polished profession of faith that we often look for in our churches. In fact, we read this story not knowing just how much of a believer the centurion is. Does he know the right words to say about who Jesus is? Do his words qualify him for membership in one of our churches? Those questions seem to be irrelevant. Here is a centurion who believes that the Christ has words that can bring wholeness even in the brokenness of his own life.*

So, what does the story of Centurion tell us about the future direction for the ministries of Edina Morningside Church? I believe that this church is called to wholeness where there is brokenness. This belief of mine is also included in the “We Will” statements approved by the congregation. You may have noticed that we have begun printing them in the bulletin. Please look with me at #4: “We will deepen our understanding of the root causes of injustice and increase the impact of our outreach work by partnering with other churches and justice ministries”. It is also possible that some of our partners could be people of other faiths – Jewish, Muslim, Pentecostal and non-denominational communities. God may be calling us to assure that – when it comes to address root causes of injustice – no one should be considered a foreigner or outside.

We need to challenge ourselves to commit to new outreach ministries. We need to open our minds to how other faiths might enrich our own. We need to seek even greater inclusivity both within our faith community and in our service to those in need. May it be so. Amen.

³ http://www.ucc.org/worship_worship-ways